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## *Film Review*



# Exploring the Religious and Environmental Allusions in *Ram Teri Ganga Mail*

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If Ganga lives, India lives. If Ganga dies, India dies.

Dr. VANDANA SHIVA



Rivers and other natural and environmental resources and issues have long been featured in Indian films (Jain & Sharma, 2023). In addition to the pollution of rivers and waterways, some films display the problem of the wealthy and strong exploiting the underprivileged, e.g., *Ram Teri Ganga Maili* (O Ram, Your Ganges is Polluted, 1985) has achieved cult status in the history of the Indian film industry. This paper attempts to recognize and appreciate the movie honouring the great river, symbolizing life, death, and liberation. It is the story of Gaṅgā, a young simpleton woman named after India's most well-known and

revered river Ganges, from a rural village in the Himalayas, who is on a journey to reunite with her lover and, in the process, faces societal judgments, brothel life and the ugly side of society. The film explores myriad themes of love, morality, and the ever-present clash between tradition and modernity in Indian culture. While most people remember the movie for its songs, stunning locations, the leading pair, and the controversy that accompanied its release, as discussed later, this review aims to explore the lesser talked about religious and environmental inspirations and allusions that form the framework of this movie and have gone unnoticed for too long.

The Indian *Itihāsa* texts and the *Purāṇa* have formed the basis for the performing arts in India and the art of storytelling since times immemorial. The *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* have been adapted repeatedly to propagate the values and morals of Hinduism in society. The beauty of these texts lies in the simplicity and adaptability of their narrative and intellectual complexity in what they try to convey. *Ram Teri Ganga Maili* is also an adaptation of one such tale of Duṣyanta and Śakuntalā from the *Ādi Parva*, chapters 68–74, in the *Mahābhārata*. While the main characters' names and settings have been altered, the essential narrative remains similar. The film intricately parallels the timeless tale, seamlessly blending ancient mythology with contemporary storytelling. Gaṅgā, akin to Śakuntalā, embodies innocence and purity and has been isolated from mainstream society in the forest. Contrariwise, Naren's urban persona and rich family background make him the ideal modern-day King Duṣyanta. Besides the similar temperaments and qualities of the protagonists, both narratives unfold with their chance encounter in the woods, leading to a blossoming romance entangled in societal norms, familial opposition, and moral dilemmas.

Furthermore, themes of love and separation form the core of both stories, driving the protagonists towards trials and tribulations. Śakuntalā's love for Duṣyanta is tested by separation when he leaves her, promising to return but forgetting his vows due to a curse. Similarly, Naren and Gaṅgā are separated when he must go to his hometown. Although he does not forget her, he believes her to be dead. After their prolonged separation, Naren realizes his mistake and seeks redemption by accepting Gaṅgā and their child, mirroring Duṣyanta's eventual recognition of Śakuntalā and their son in the *Mahābhārata*. The tales' basic story arc and cultural and moral exploration are similar. The 1985 film can be considered a legitimate adaptation and a poignant homage to the *Mahābhārata*'s Duṣyanta and Śakuntalā story, with the timeless theme captivating audiences across generations.

Besides borrowing its basic story premise from the *Mahābhārata*, *Ram Teri Ganga Maili* references other Hindu religious traditions, texts, and sacred

places. With a sea of devotees, multiple Hindu temples, the sound of bells ringing, visuals of people performing rituals, and the burning pyre, the movie's opening and ending scenes on the banks of the holy river foreshadow the importance of Gaṅgā in the film and Indian society as noted by numerous scholars such as D.S. Bhargava (1987). The primary shooting locations and the setting of the movie are also important. Gangotri is the source of the Ganges and is revered as the birthplace of the sacred river, where it descended on the earth from the heavens. It embodies purity, innocence, freshness, and spiritual significance, and it is here from which the character of Gaṅgā hails in the movie, where the protagonists meet and their love blossoms. It signifies the characteristics of the Ganges before the river is exposed to the harsh realities of city life and is polluted by society.

On the other hand, Varanasi, with its ancient ghats, is the spiritual hub where devotees seek purification and enlightenment in the holy waters of the Ganges. However, in the present day and age, it is the place where the river is polluted, and hence, the choice of location in the film signifies Gaṅgā being exploited and losing her purity and innocence. The opening credit scene of performing rituals to the Shiva Lingam also shows the important religious practice of receiving blessings before starting work. The film focuses on a book by Swami Vivekananda, the pioneering Hindu monk who enthralled the audience at the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago in 1893, to introduce Naren's character and establish him as the virtuous protagonist. Furthermore, the lyrics of the film's title song reference the rituals and characteristics associated with the Ganges as a holy river and a Hindu deity. The song can be viewed as a saga that chronicles the spiritual significance and relevance of the Ganges in the present age. The last scene has a background song with the appropriate verses from a Hindi adaptation of the Rāmāyaṇa, signifying the importance of upholding one's vows to be true to Dharma. Lastly, the iconic visual of Gaṅgā dressed in a white saree standing under the waterfall has achieved iconic status as one of the most memorable scenes in Indian cinema. It was the reason for the controversy shrouding the movie as well as the reason for its subsequent success and memorability. However, the protagonist Gaṅgā, dressed up in white and holding a waterpot, is a subtle reference to the popular depiction of the revered deity, the Holy Mother Gaṅgā, as a lady in flowing white garments and having the same vessel in one hand. While open for contention, all these visual allusions to Hinduism are the film's way of using symbolism and attempting to convey a deeper meaning beyond what meets the eye, like symbolism in the original *Itihāsa* texts.

Apart from the visuals, settings and songs, the movie's themes also have a deep-rooted basis in Hinduism. One of the central themes in *Ram Teri Ganga*

*Maili* is the concept of *Dharma*. Throughout the film, characters grapple with ethical dilemmas and strive to adhere to their sense of *Dharma*. While the protagonists face it to a larger extent, even side characters like Gaṅgā's father, confront the moral dilemma of accepting money in exchange for marrying Gaṅgā to a wealthy groom. However, despite financial hardships, the father refuses to compromise his principles and cites his commitment to *Dharma*. The clash between traditional values and modernity is an omnipresent reality of Indian society and serves as a backdrop for exploring *Dharma* in the film. When Gaṅgā's relationship with Naren becomes known to her family, it sparks controversy. It challenges traditional notions of societal expectations, just as in the original tale where Śakuntalā had apprehensions about whether she was going against *Dharma* by marrying Duṣyanta. However, she is convinced by a great dialogue on the essence of *Dharma* and marrying for love (*Gandharva Vivāha*).

Similarly, Naren and Gaṅgā's story also challenges and opens the eyes of their friends and family to not view *Dharma* as a constraint and rigid principle. The movie also incorporates Hindu rituals and ceremonies, such as prayers on the riverbank and ceremonies honouring ancestors that reflect the characters' adherence to religious and cultural practices. The film's dialogues explore dharmic implications on individual behaviour and societal norms. For instance, a poignant exchange between Gaṅgā and her father emphasizes the importance of upholding one's duty, even in adversity. This dialogue underscores the significance of *Dharma* as a guiding principle in navigating life's challenges and moral dilemmas and how Indian familial values and advice find an anchor. The value of renunciation is highlighted when Gaṅgā sacrifices her happiness for her family's well-being, agreeing to marry a wealthy suitor to alleviate their financial burdens. Despite her desires, Gaṅgā prioritizes her sense of duty towards her family, embodying the essence of *Dharma* in her actions. The effect of karma is seen in the self-sacrificing and righteous Gaṅgā, who finds her happiness eventually, while the antagonist's daughter fails to fulfil her wishes. As can be inferred from the examples in this section of the paper, the Hindu values of *Dharma*, karma, and renunciation are presented throughout the various sequences and dialogues of the movie.

In the film, the spiritual significance of the Ganges is given immense importance and is repeatedly described as profound and transformative. The holy river embodies purity and divinity, drawing characters to embark on pilgrimages seeking spiritual renewal and redemption. The narrative intertwines *Dharma*, karma, and liberation (*mokṣa*), suggesting that sincere actions and repentance can lead to spiritual cleansing. Naren's paternal grandmother wishes to visit Gangotri, the origin of the holy river, to collect the sacred

water, *Gaṅgājala*. Like most Hindus, she hopes her ashes will be immersed in the holy waters upon death, showing the river's religious significance. A Hindu text, *Nārada Purāna*, says that the sight, the name, and the touch of the holy Ganges cleanses one of all sins and taking a dip in the sacred Ganges bestows heavenly blessings. The cremation of a dead body at the banks of the river or even casting the ashes of the deceased in its water is believed to be auspicious and leads to the liberation of the departed. However, amidst the spiritual backdrop lies a stark socio-economic reality and a representation of how the river has become "*maili*," tainted and polluted. The film depicts the harsh disparities faced by rural communities along the river, highlighting poverty, exploitation, and gender inequality. The initial scenes of the politicians addressing the masses and subsequent dialogues among the rich at parties show how religion is used to manipulate the general population. Politicians use religious allusions, as depicted by their speeches given in the movie's first scenes, because they know the emotions attached to religion and the gullibility of people because of it. Moreover, the film sheds light on the class divides and land disputes, illustrating broader socio-economic injustices in Indian society. Despite the spiritual solace offered by the Ganges, the characters must confront the harsh socio-economic realities that shape their lives, reflecting the intricate interplay between spirituality and societal inequities in the *Kali Yuga*, the mythical dark and immoral contemporary times, according to the Hindu texts.

Sustainability and environmental degradation are a reality of the present capitalist society. An indisputable disconnect exists between religious reverence for nature and human actions leading to environmental degradation. Animals and nature worship are of utmost importance in Hinduism, and elements of nature and their beings are supposed to be treated with reverence. Although the rituals and traditions teach sustainability and respect for the shared natural heritage, the state of the holy river is depictive of the state of all of nature and how humankind has exploited natural resources indiscriminately. Ahead of its time, made in the 1980s, the film depicts environmental degradation through various important scenes, utilizing powerful visuals to represent the once-pristine river now tainted with garbage, industrial waste, and other pollutants. For instance, there are scenes where the protagonist Gaṅgā encounters plastic bags and debris floating on the water's surface, showcasing the extent of pollution. Even Gaṅgā's father laments the deteriorating condition of the river, emphasizing how it used to be a source of life and purity for their community, highlighting the emotional and economic significance of the river to the characters and underscoring the gravity of the environmental degradation they witness. Throughout the movie, characters also discuss the pollution of

the Ganges, reflecting broader societal attitudes and awareness about environmental issues. One notable example is when characters debate the causes of pollution, the responsibility of individuals and industries in mitigating environmental damage, and the politicians refer to environmental degradation in their political speeches in the film. These dialogues raise awareness about environmental issues and encourage reflection on collective responsibility. If the situation was dire enough to be mentioned in a movie almost half a century ago, it should be a wake-up call for global citizens everywhere on the need for collective conservation and prevention efforts. The lack of effective regulation and inadequate waste management infrastructure exacerbates the situation, posing significant challenges to restoring the health of environmental resources in contemporary times. The depiction of river pollution underscores the film's broader thematic exploration of environmental degradation, spirituality, and societal values. It serves as a poignant reminder of the urgent need for environmental conservation efforts to protect our natural heritage and ensure the well-being of present and future generations.

Vasudha Narayanan (2001) notes that the Purāṇas and other Hindu texts describe India's sacred rivers as goddesses. She discusses the rivers' menstruation, "pregnancy cravings," and devotees' offerings for such "cravings" in specific seasons. For instance, a Hindu text, *Kātyāyana Smṛti*, discusses a rule about river bathing, "In two months, in the rainy season, all the rivers get their menstrual courses. No one shall bathe in them, excluding the rivers which go to an ocean (10.5)." (Glucklich 1994:13). Anne Feldhaus (1995) describes similar patterns in other Indian rivers. Kelly Alley observes that the sacred river may be considered polluted for the Hindu devotees, but the Ganges, a purifying goddess, can never be inauspicious (2002). The goddess Gaṅgā is supposed to clean both the river and the devotees. The film reviewed in this paper entertains with a didactic plot by delivering multiple explicit and implicit messages showing that religion, society, and the environment are inextricably connected. The movie is a good example of how the stories in the *Itihāsa* texts are relevant, easily understandable, and adaptable in every age, as the values imparted transcend the period in which they are narrated.

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